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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the increasingly important role of the family in caring for the frail elderly has been well-documented. In the present study, young adult college students were asked to evaluate a hypothetical employed, married, middle-aged parent who was described as providing care for an elderly parent. The effects of three caretaker characteristics on perceptions of the stimulus person were examined by means of a series of vignettes which varied according to gender of caretaker, type of caregiving arrangement, and presence or absence of children in the caregiver's home. College students (N=240), including 144 females and 96 males, evaluated a briefly depicted stimulus person on bipolar scales that described personality traits, job performance characteristics, and role overload variables. Each participant rated one of eight employed married adults who was described as either female or male, either providing care for an elderly mother (primary caregiver), or hiring someone to provide such care (secondary caregiver), and as having two children who either still lived or no longer lived at home. Women were viewed as experiencing more role overload than men. Primary caregivers were perceived as experiencing more role overload, as being less job-oriented, and as being more nurturant than secondary caregivers. These findings are important, for they are perhaps the first to indicate that others are aware of the stresses experienced by middle-aged elder caregivers, especially women. (LLL)

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Perceptions of Caregivers of Elderly Parents by College Students: Effects of Caregiver Gender, Type of Care and Presence of Children

Claire Etaugh and Maureen Spinner[1]

Abstract

College students (144 females and 96 males) evaluated a briefly depicted stimulus person on 31 7-point bipolar scales that described personality traits, job performance characteristics and role overload variables. Each participant rated one of eight employed married adults who was described as either female or male, either providing care for an elderly mother ("primary caregiver") or hiring someone to provide such care ("secondary caregiver"), and as having two children who either still lived or no longer lived at home. Women were viewed as experiencing more role overload than men. Primary caregivers were perceived as experiencing more role overload, as being less job-oriented, and as being more nurturant than secondary caregivers.

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Abstract

College students (144 females and 96 males) evaluated a briefly depicted stimulus person on 31 7-point bipolar scales that described personality traits, job performance characteristics and role overload variables. Each participant rated one of eight employed married adults who was described as either female or male, either providing care for an elderly mother ("primary caregiver") or hiring someone to provide such care ("secondary caregiver"), and as having two children who either still lived or no longer lived at home. Women were viewed as experiencing more role overload than men. Primary caregivers were perceived as experiencing more role overload, as being less job-oriented, and as being more nurturant than secondary caregivers.

Perceptions of Caregivers of Elderly Parents by College Students: Effects of Caregiver Gender, Type of Care and Presence of Children

In recent years, the increasingly important role of the family in caring for the frail elderly has been well-documented (e.g. Brody, 1985; Horowitz, 1985a,b; Litwak, 1985; Stephens & Christianson, 1986). Nearly three-quarters of all informal caregivers of the elderly are female, with daughters and wives providing most of the care. Approximately two-thirds of caregivers are under the age of 65, and a substantial proportion have additional family obligations (spouse, children) and employment responsibilities (e.g. Brody, 1985; Cantor, 1983; Stone, Cafferata, & Sangl, 1987).

Comparisons of adult sons and daughters who provide care for their elderly parents reveal a number of gender differences. Daughters provide more hours of caregiving assistance than do sons, with differences being greatest in such domestic tasks as food preparation and smallest in the area of financial management (Horowitz, 1985a; Stoller, 1983). One of the most striking gender differences concerns the relationship between caregiving and employment responsibilities. Stoller (1983) found that being employed significantly reduced the amount of caregiving assistance provided by sons but did not affect the amount of care given by daughters. Additionally, daughters are more likely than sons to quit their jobs, alter their work schedules and take time off without pay in order to care for an elderly parent (Stone et al., 1987). Given the additional fact that women, even when employed,

spend more time than men on household and child care responsibilities (e.g. Berardo, Sheehan, & Leslie, 1987; Douthitt, 1989; Pleck, 1985), it is little wonder that women who care for the elderly consistently report more stress and role overload than do male caregivers (Cantor, 1983; Horowitz, 1985a,b; Johnson, 1983).

The research described above has provided extensive information on the nature and magnitude of informal care to the elderly, including the characteristics and activities of caregivers. This research has focused almost exclusively on self-perceptions of caregivers, i.e. the self-reported physical, psychological, familial and employment consequences of caregiving (e.g., Brody, 1985; Cantor, 1983; George & Gwyther, 1986; Horowitz, 1985; Stone, et al., 1987). Virtually no attention, however, has been paid to the ways in which others perceive these caregivers to the elderly.

The importance of examining others' perceptions is shown by research demonstrating that perceivers' expectations about a target person may influence social interactions with that person. (See reviews by Darley & Fazio, 1980; Harris & Rosenthal, 1985; Miller & Turnbull, 1986). In recent years, researchers have begun to study how others perceive women and men who participate in multiple family and employment roles (e.g. Bridges, 1987; Etaugh & Stern, 1984; Etaugh & Study, 1989; Russell & Rush, 1987). However, when the caregiver role has been included as a variable, it has always involved care of children, not care of an elderly parent. Assessments of women's and men's personality, job performance, and behaviors are affected by their role as a caregiver of a young

child (e.g. Etaugh & Folger, 1990; Jackson & Sullivan, 1989; Russell & Rush, 1987). Does caring for an elderly parent, in combination with other family and employment roles, also affect how women and men are perceived? That is the question addressed in the present study.

As the first exploratory step in exploring how caregivers of the elderly are perceived, we decided to examine the perceptions held by young adult college students. It is relevant and important to know how young adults view middle-aged caregivers of the elderly, since many young adults themselves have middle-aged parents who currently provide some type of care for an elderly relative. A study currently in progress by the present authors, for example, found that nearly 60% of a sample of college students reported that one or both parents were providing such care. Do young adults believe that the families of middle-aged caregivers are slighted because the caregiver is devoting time and energy to the care of an elderly relative, or do they see the caregiver as <u>more</u> family-oriented and nurturant because of the provision of such care? Are young adults aware of the stresses and role overload which frequently are reported by the middle-aged caregivers themselves? If young adults <u>do</u> perceive that caregivers experience problems of overload, are they sympathetic or do they view caregivers as being less able to handle effectively other aspects of their lives? Finally, are caregiving women perceived differently than caregiving men? Because middle-aged caregivers, especially women, frequently have responsibilities both for elderly

parents and their teenage or young adult children (Older Women's League, 1989), the perceptions of middle-aged caregivers by young adults can have important implications for the interactions between the two generations. Additionally, today's college students are tomorrow's caregivers of the elderly. The study in progress mentioned earlier found that approximately 25% of a sample of college students already have assisted their parents in providing care for an elderly relative.

In the present study, young adult college students were asked to evaluate a hypothetical employed, married, middle-aged parent who was described as providing care for an elderly parent. The effects of three caretaker characteristics on perceptions of the stimulus person were examined by means of a series of vignettes which varied according to: 1) gender of caretaker: female or male; 2) type of caregiving arrangement: primary (individual spends several hours per day caregiving) vs. secondary (individual hires someone else to provide care); 3) presence or absence of children in the caregiver's home. The following hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1: Female caregivers (both primary and secondary) who also occupy the roles of employee, spouse and parent will be viewed as experiencing more role overload than male caregivers who occupy those same roles. As noted above, women retain primary responsibility for homemaking and parenting even when they are employed full-time, whereas men are less likely to experience such multiple demands.

Hypothesis 2: Primary caregivers will be perceived as experiencing more role overload than secondary caregivers. Providing several hours a day of direct care presumably will be seen as increasing the demands placed on individuals who already occupy several other roles.

Hypothesis 3: Female primary caregivers with children still living at home will be viewed as experiencing the most role overload of all; male secondary caregivers with no children at home, the least. This hypothesis follows from the reasoning given in support of Hypotheses 1 and 2 and is based on the assumption that participation in multiple roles is related to perceptions of increased overload.

Hypothesis 4: Primary caregivers will be evaluated as more nurturant and family-oriented than secondary caregivers. This hypothesis is based in part on research dealing with the related phenomenon of how others perceive women and men who choose to stay home or reduce work hours to care for their small children (somewhat analogous to "primary caregivers") as compared to those who choose to be employed full-time and pay others to care for their children during working hours (somewhat analogous to "secondary caregivers"). Men and women engaging in "primary" childcare are perceived as more nurturant and family-oriented than those who use "secondary" childcare (Etaugh & Folger, 1990; Etaugh & Study, 1989).

Hypothesis 5: Female caregivers will be perceived as more nurturant and family-oriented than male caregivers. Women

generally are stereotyped as more nurturant and family-oriented than men (see review by Lips, 1988). Furthermore, as noted earlier, caregiving daughters provide more hours of assistance than do sons.

Hypothesis 6: Primary caregivers will be rated as less job-oriented than secondary caregivers. The time devoted to direct caregiving may be perceived as time that is taken away from employment-related activities.

Hypothesis 7: Female primary caregivers will be evaluated as less job-oriented than male primary caregivers. As mentioned above, caregiving daughters not only provide more hours of assistance than do sons, but they also are more likely to modify their work schedules or take time off work in order to care for an elderly parent.

Method

Participants

The participants were 240 students (144 females and 96 males) enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a private, medium-sized Midwestern university. The majority of participants were between 18 and 22 years of age. All students present in class on the day of testing agreed to participate.

Procedure

Participants were told that the study concerned the accuracy of first impressions based on a brief description of a person. Eighteen females and 12 males each received one of eight booklets in which the description of the stimulus person varied with respect to gender, parent caregiver status and presence of children at

home. The description read as follows:

Ann (Alan) Davis is 46 years old and married. She (he) has two children, both of whom still (no longer) live at home. For several years, she (he) has been employed full-time as a real-estate agent. Ann (Alan) has a widowed mother living nearby, who is in poor health. During the past few years, Ann (Alan) has spent (has hired someone to spend) several hours each day taking care of her (his) mother.

The occupation of real-estate agent was chosen because it is perceived as sex-neutral and average in occupational prestige (Etaugh & Study, 1989). The care recipient was designated as a female since the majority of elderly adults receiving care are women (Stone et al., 1987).

Participants rated the stimulus person on 31 7-point bipolar scales which described personality traits (e.g., sociable -unsociable, happy-unhappy, secure-insecure), professional performance characteristics (e.g. dedicated to career-not dedicated to career, successful in job-unsuccessful in job), nurturance variables (e.g. dedicated to family-not dedicated to family, selfish-unselfish) and role overload variables (e.g. overworked-not overworked, mentally exhausted-not mentally exhausted, experiencing many conflicts-experiencing few conflicts). These items had been used in previous studies concerning perceptions of women and men as a function of their family and employment roles (e.g., Etaugh & Folger, 1990; Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990; Etaugh & Study, 1989). The favorable pole of the scale appeared on the left for half the items and on the right for the other half.

Results

In scoring the 7-point scales, the unfavorable pole was given a score of 1 and the favorable pole a score of 7, with a midpoint of 4. Factor analysis was used in order to reduce the complexity of the data and to achieve a more parsimonious description of the variables involved (see Cohen & Cohen, 1975). Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated between the 31 items. The correlation matrix was factor analyzed using the principal-components method with varimax rotation in order to identify orthogonal factors (Nunnally, 1967). Four orthogonal factors emerged, which the authors designated "role overload", "adjustment", "nurturance" and "job orientation". These factors accounted for 18.4, 14.1, 7.2, and 4.8% of the total variance, respectively. Table 1 shows that the items loading most heavily (.50 and above) on each of the four factors are as follows

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Insert Table 1 about here

(in descending order): role overload--frustrated, physically fatigued, under stress, frequently overwhelmed, experiencing many conflicts, mentally exhausted, tense, and overworked; adjustment--comfortable with others, happy, secure, friendly, likable, great personal satisfaction; nurturance--reliable, unselfish, sensitive to the needs of others, affectionate, responsible, dedicated to family; job orientation--intelligent, attractive, influential, dedicated to career, successful in job.

Six items did not load heavily on any factor (independent, competitive, stable, professionally competent, sociable, has personality problems).

The factor scores for each factor were analyzed by means of a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 (Gender of Stimulus Person X Parent Caregiver Status X Presence of Children X Gender of Subject) analysis of variance. Comparisons among means for significant interactions were made with Tukey's HSD test. Table 2 presents F values and mean factor scores for all independent variables. The process of performing the factor analysis converted the original 7-point scales to factors

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Insert Table 2 about here

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with values ranging from -1.00 to 1.00. Negative numbers are equivalent to unfavorable ratings (including perceptions of high role overload) and positive numbers are equivalent to favorable ratings (including perceptions of low role overload).

The main effect of caregiver status was significant for three of the four factors. Primary caregivers were perceived as experiencing more role overload, as being less job oriented, and as being more nurturant than secondary caregivers.

The main effect of gender of stimulus person was significant for the role overload factor. Women were viewed as experiencing more overload than men.

Gender of subject was a significant main effect for the adjustment factor. Female subjects gave more favorable ratings than did males.

The only significant interaction was a four-way interaction for the job orientation factor, F (1,224) = 5.07, p<.025. This interaction indicates that the significant main effect of caregiver status on the job orientation factor was due largely to the ratings of male participants. Female participants gave similar ratings to all stimulus persons on this factor. Male participants, however, sharply differentiated among two of the stimulus persons, giving a highly unfavorable rating (M =.74) to female primary caregivers with children at home, and a highly favorable rating (M =.65) to male secondary caregivers with no children at home.

Discussion

The hypothesis that female caregivers would be perceived as experiencing more role overload than male caregivers was supported. This finding is consistent with the research showing that women who care for the elderly report experiencing more role overload and stress than do male caregivers (Cantor, 1983; Horowitz, 1985a; Johnson, 1983).

The hypothesis that primary caregivers would be seen as experiencing more role overload than secondary caregivers also was supported. These perceptions, like the ones reported above regarding gender differences in overload, appear to reflect actual experiences of caregivers of the elderly. Cantor (1983), for example, found that the more time and effort caregivers spent in giving assistance, the greater the disruption and negative impact on their personal life.

There was no support for the hypothesis that perceptions of role overload would be greatest for female primary caregivers with children still living at home, and least for male secondary caregivers with no children at home. Although women were rated as experiencing more overload than men, and primary caregivers were considered to have more overload than secondary caregivers, there was no interaction between the variables of caregiver's gender and type of care. Moreover, presence or absence of children in the caregiver's home had virtually no effect on perceptions of overload. While the ages of the stimulus person's children were not specified, it is highly likely that the children of a 46 year-old parent would be envisioned as being at least of school age and quite possibly adolescent or young adult. Older children require less parental attention and may reduce a caregiver's (especially a mother's) load by assisting with household tasks and care of younger siblings. Further, older children can reduce some of their parents' burden of caring for an elderly relative by taking on some of these assistance tasks themselves. As noted earlier, a study in progress by the present authors found that approximately 25% of a sample of college students had assisted their parents in providing care for an elderly relative. Thus, the present subjects may have viewed the presence of children in a household as not adding appreciably to the role overload of the parents.

The hypothesis that primary caregivers would be evaluated as more nurturant and family-oriented than secondary caregivers was

supported. These results are similar to findings indicating that women and men who stay home or reduce work hours to spend time with their young children are viewed as more nurturant and family-oriented than those who work full-time and use other forms of child care (Etaugh & Folger 1990; Etaugh & Study, 1989).

The hypothesis that female caregivers would be perceived as more nurturant and family-oriented than male caregivers was not supported. Apparently, the more important differentiator in judging nurturance was whether the care was primary or secondary. Although women typically are stereotyped as more nurturant than men (Lips, 1988), the present study described a situation in which both sexes were engaging in both stereotypically feminine (i.e. caregiving) and stereotypically masculine (i.e. employment) roles. These conditions may have led to the judgment that men and women were equally nurturant.

The hypothesis that primary caregivers would be rated as less job-oriented than secondary caregivers received supported. This result is somewhat similar to research showing that women and men who choose to stay home or reduce work hours to be primary caregivers of their young children are seen as less professionally competent than parents who are employed full-time (Etaugh & Folger, 1990; Etaugh & Study, 1989).

There was limited support for the hypothesis that female primary caregivers would be evaluated as less job-oriented than male primary caregivers. The finding was obtained only for male participants and was further influenced by the presence of children at home.

In conclusion, female caregivers were seen as experiencing more overload than male caregivers and primary caregivers were rated as having more overload than secondary caregivers. These perceptions are in accord with self-reports obtained from caregivers themselves in previous research. Primary caregivers also were perceived as more nurturant and family-oriented, but on the negative side, their caregiving was viewed as detracting from their job orientation.

These findings are important, for they are perhaps the first to indicate that others are indeed aware of the stresses experienced by middle-aged elder caregivers, especially women. Further, the results show that elder caregivers are perceived as nurturant and family-oriented, rather than as slighting their families. Our next step in this line of research will be to examine young adults' perceptions not of a hypothetical caregiver, but of their own mothers and fathers who are actually providing elder care. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in a study of three generations of women, young women (about the age of the present subjects) were more likely to prefer an adult child as a provider of care in their old age whereas their middle-aged mothers were more likely to prefer formal nonfamily providers (Brody, 1981). As Brody notes, these preferences may indicate that middle-aged women are experiencing the pressure of multiple role responsibilities and wishing to spare their own children similar burdens. In light of Brody's findings, it would be informative for future researchers to compare how young college-age adults and their middle-aged parents

perceive caregivers of the elderly, and to directly compare such perceptions with these individuals' personal preferences for types of service providers in old age.

The perception that primary caregivers are less job-oriented than secondary caregivers was due primarily to male raters' unfavorable evaluations of female primary caregivers with children at home. This finding has important implications. For one thing, growing numbers of adults are involved in caring for an elderly parent (e.g. Brody, 1985). Second, these responsibilities are borne disproportionately by middle-aged women who increasingly have both employment and child care responsibilities (e.g., Horowitz, 1985a). Finally, men are more likely than women to be in supervisory positions (Taylor, 1988). Taken together, the present results suggest a possible scenario in which a male supervisor's evaluations of a women's job performance might be negatively biased by the knowledge that she was involved in caring for both children and/or an elderly relative, when in fact these variables might have no bearing on her actual job performance. The potentially serious consequences of such potential evaluation biases highlight the need for future research which directly examines work supervisors' perceptions of caregivers to the elderly.

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Table 1. Varimax Rotated Factor Loadings[a]

	Factors			
Items (left pole)	Role Overload	Adjustment	Nurturance	Job Orientation
Rarely feels frustrated	-.80	.07	.02	-.11
Physically fatigued	.73	-.11	-.17	.04
Under stress	.73	.14	-.02	-.18
Rarely feels overwhelmed	-.70	.11	-.01	-.06
Experiences few conflicts	-.69	-.05	-.06	.13
Not mentally exhausted	-.69	.15	.03	-.00
Tense	.68	.08	.10	.07
Overworked	.55	-.02	-.29	-.11
Comfortable with others	.07	.63	-.28	.01
Happy	-.29	.61	-.22	-.13
Secure	-.27	.59	.01	-.10
Friendly	-.01	.58	-.38	-.02
Likeable	-.08	.57	-.33	-.09
Great personal satisfaction	-.05	.52	-.04	.02
Unreliable	-.09	-.19	.75	.19
Selfish	-.05	-.03	.75	.09
Insensitive to other's needs	.02	-.06	.72	.10
Affectionate	.05	.44	-.60	.20
Responsible	.11	.20	-.52	-.14
Dedicated to family	.15	.28	-.51	.26

Items (left pole)	Factors: Role Overload	Adjustment	Nurturance	Job Orientation
Unintelligent	-.07	.22	.16	<u>.54</u>
Unattractive	.08	-.25	.07	<u>.51</u>
Uninfluential	.17	.03	.34	<u>.51</u>
Dedicated to career	.13	.44	.31	<u>-.50</u>
Successful in job	.09	.45	-.04	<u>-.50</u>
Unstable	.28	-.40	.33	.30
Dependent	-.00	.15	.11	.42
Professionally competent	.12	.42	.02	-.09
Competitive	.17	.04	.18	-.39
Has personality adjustment problems	.20	-.24	.36	.30
Unsociable	-.03	-.48	.19	.26
Eigenvalues	5.71	4.36	2.22	1.50

[a] Items loading most heavily on each factor are underlined

Table 2. Fs and Mean Factor Scores for Independent Variables[a]

Independent Variables	Factors							
	Role Overload		Adjustment		Nurturance		Job Orientation	
	F	Mean	F	Mean	F	Mean	F	Mean
Gender of Stimulus Person	18.73*		3.43		.51		.46	
Female		-.27		.12		-.04		-.04
Male		.27		-.12		.04		.04
Type of Care	7.72*		.02		59.32*		12.39*	
Primary		-.17		.01		.45		-.22
Secondary		.17		-.01		-.45		.22
Presence of Children	.38		.03		.21		.20	
Yes		-.04		.01		.03		-.03
No		.04		-.01		-.03		.03
Gender of Subject	.88		10.36*		1.21		1.91	
Female		.05		.17		.05		.07
Male		-.07		-.25		-.08		-.11

[a] The more positive the score, the more favorable the evaluation (including perceptions of low role overload); the more negative the score, the less favorable the evaluation (including perceptions of high role overload).

* $p < .001$